

Male leaders judged less competent when asking for help

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

There might be no such thing as a stupid question, but new research suggests male leaders may be judged harshly if they ask any questions at all.

Researchers including Ashleigh Shelby Rosette, a professor in Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, found that male leaders were

judged as less competent when they asked others for help.

"Frequently, in the context of leadership, we think of males as being advantaged because they represent the prototypical leader," Rosette said. "But what are the conditions under which this may not be the case, and male leaders are disadvantaged? That is focus of this work."

Rosette led a research team that included Jennifer Mueller at the University of San Diego and R. David Lebel at the University of Pittsburgh. Their findings, "Are Male Leaders Penalized for Seeking Help? The Influence of Gender and Asking Behaviors on Competence Perceptions," were recently published online in the *Leadership Quarterly* journal.

The research combined [field data](#) and experiments. The field data were taken from a group of 144 business students who went on several weeklong leadership-building expeditions that involved biking, sailing, climbing and hiking in challenging environments. The students took turns leading small groups. The researchers gathered data from surveys completed by 65 of the students—38 men and 27 women—that evaluated the competence of their leader each day. The survey also assessed the extent to which leaders asked others for help.

In the experimental study, 358 undergraduate students—54 percent of whom were women—were asked to imagine they were employees of a fictional company and then told to evaluate the competence of a company leader based on a description of a meeting. Some participants were presented with meetings led by a man, others read about meetings run by a woman. In some scenarios the leader asked for help, in others he or she did not.

The results were consistent across both the field and experimental data. "We found that men who asked for help were evaluated as less

competent than men who did not ask for help," Rosette said. "Women were evaluated comparably regardless of their asking behavior."

The paper doesn't assess the potential career consequences for male leaders who ask questions. But Rosette said there could be an impact.

"When a person is perceived as though they are not competent because they are asking for help, that could probably have some long-term career implications with regard to promotions, appointments and evaluations," she said. "Most importantly, these perceptions may serve as barriers to men's willingness to ask for assistance when needed. Regardless of whether we acknowledge it or not, these various biases creep into our decision-making processes. Perceptions matter."

More information: "Are male leaders penalized for seeking help? The influence of gender and asking behaviors on competence perceptions," *Leadership Quarterly*, Available online 26 April 2015, ISSN 1048-9843, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.02.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.02.001)

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